

‘The problem with Nero’: gender and invective in *Annals* 15

Christopher Whitton

Nero’s reign was a disaster. A disaster in bringing an end to the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but also containing such catastrophic events as the Boudiccan revolt in Britain or the great fire in Rome. But would it have been such a disaster had Nero been a real man? Christopher Whitton looks closely at *Annals* 15 and explores the answer to this question that Tacitus gives.

While Rome burned, Nero fiddled. True or false, it’s one of the great images of antiquity – the tyrant-artist in a nutshell. Certainly the great city fire features as a major and traumatic event for Tacitus, who makes it the literal centrepiece of *Annals* 15 (38–45). Did Nero start it? Tacitus typically raises the question without giving a clear answer. But he also manages to suggest that the fire was somehow connected, more deeply than in simple terms of arson, to Nero. And he does it with barely a single word.

Nero the bride

Consider how Tacitus leads into the event. His narrative for A.D. 64 begins with Nero’s theatrical performance in Naples, his aborted trips to Greece and Egypt, and his conversion of Rome into one big stage for dinner-parties. Then come the debaucheries of a feast thrown by his henchman Tigellinus, which seem to exhaust every conceivable vice – but Nero can go one further, by playing bride to one of his sex-slaves (*exoleti*), a man by the name of Pythagoras.

Tacitus paints the scene with savage attention to detail.

The Imperial Commander dressed in a veil, auspices taken, dowry, marital bed, wedding torches – in short, everything witnessed which even in the case of a woman is hidden by night.

(*Annals* 15.37.4, freely translated)

Then: ‘There followed a disaster ...’ (15.38.1), and the fire is underway. The transition is nonchalant, deadpan – and deadly. Of course Tacitus plays innocent, the sober annalist documenting events as

they file past in order. But you believe that at your peril. A brilliant advocate and orator, Tacitus had been trained all his life in rhetoric. He was a master of the ‘interested narrative’, the technique of telling a story so as to convince your audience of your version of events – with or without their realizing that you’re doing so. So what’s the story here?

Tacitus isn’t the only ancient writer to mention Pythagoras: Cassius Dio refers to the same ‘wedding’, and Pythagoras is probably the ‘Doryphorus’ who marries Nero in Suetonius’ *Life of Nero*. But only Tacitus sets it just here in his narrative. He also throws in what looks like a pointed reminder after the fire. Among the efforts to appease the gods, Tacitus dwells on the rituals offered to Juno, in particular the *sellisternia* (‘sacred banquets’) celebrated by ‘women who had husbands’ (*feminae quibus mariti erant*). That wordy phrase – ‘married women’ (*matronae*) would have done well enough – can be explained as a typical Tacitean mannerism, mimicking, for just a moment, the verbosity of official records. But it surely has a subtle edge to it, too: the fire was preceded by a degenerate feast and an impossible marriage; it is followed by a sacred feast performed by the real married ladies of Rome. Both obviously and subtly, then, Nero’s frolics with Pythagoras are being closely connected with Rome’s great disaster. Why?

Roman manliness undermined

In a sense the answer is easy: for a free Roman male to allow himself to be penetrated – as Tacitus implies Nero did – was strictly taboo. The problem wasn’t so much having a male partner as playing the

passive role: in this starkly gendered society, the man’s role was to be strong, dominant, and active, the woman’s (and the slave’s) to be weak, dominated, and passive. The word ‘passive’ itself makes that clear enough, derived as it is from *patior* ‘have (something) done to you’. For Nero to submit to Pythagoras, then, is to break one of the deepest-set social codes in Rome. To do it in public is worse still, not just shameless but a gesture of contempt for the senators forced to watch.

The sharpest blade in Tacitus’ sentence is the single word *imperator* (‘Imperial Commander’ in my translation): to do this as a Roman emperor raises serious ideological problems. The emperor embodies the state, and that means embodying (male) power – the power of free over slave, of Rome over its provinces. The entire hierarchy of empire depends on it. What happens when Nero tosses it so blatantly aside?

True to his name (‘Mr Silent’), Tacitus is tight-lipped. But the ramifications of this question spread far and wide through the *Annals*. Nero’s failure as a man is a running theme, expressed most clearly in his ‘disgusting’ ambitions as a charioteer, musician, and actor – the word is Tacitus’ (*foedum*, 14.14.1). To tread the boards was not just unseemly for a Roman nobleman, it was an abrogation of manliness. When, later in book 15, the conspirators dither with their plans to attack Nero, others encourage them: even ‘real men of courage’ (*viros fortes*) can be overcome by surprise, never mind ‘that thespian’ (*ille scaenicus*, 15.59.2). A theatrical type, they are saying (and many Romans might have agreed) is the opposite of a real man.

Getting manliness wrong

Of course Nero did prove himself a man in other ways. He worked his way through three wives, and if we had the end of the *Annals* we might have Tacitus’ description of his ‘marriage’ with the castrated boy Sporus, this time with Nero playing the active role. In fact, some scholars have been so bemused by the ‘uncharacteristic’

story of Pythagoras that they explain it away as a parody, a joke staged by Nero. For biographers of Nero, that may be an important question. But for Tacitus, historian and orator, the ultimate fact of the matter is only a detail, like the question whether Nero was literally effeminate or habitually passive in bed. What matters for him is how that detail can be used symbolically as a key to understanding Nero's principate – or as a weapon in attacking it.

The most important task of a Roman man was to produce sons, to become the *paterfamilias* ('father of the family'). In the case of an emperor this was doubly important. For one thing, he needed an heir: succession defined the principate, as Tacitus makes abundantly clear at the start of the *Annals*. But aside from this literal role, the emperor also had a figurative role as *Pater Patriae*, 'Father of the Fatherland', nurturing, protecting – not to mention ruling – Rome and its empire.

Nero himself, despite his three marriages, never produced a son. His career as a parent begins and ends, in fact, within a few lines of the *Annals*: the birth of a royal daughter – and her death in infancy (15.23). Cynical as ever, Tacitus is not overwhelmed with family feelings at this sad event. The primary target of his irony is the farcical fawning of the senate, who charge, like a herd of cretins stampeding across a stage, to decree every conceivable celebration of the birth, only to rush back again with honours for the divine, dead baby. But Tacitus finds a few words to censure Nero too, for his excessive, hubristic joy when she is born, and because, when she dies, 'he behaved with immoderate grief'.

Rather harsh, you might say: how is a man supposed to react when his first and only child dies in infancy? Tacitus gives an answer elsewhere, in his biography of his impeccable father-in-law, Agricola. When his son dies at the age of one, he exhibits just the moderation Nero lacked:

He did not bear this misfortune with a show of endurance, as many bold men do, nor again with tears and grief like a woman; and in his sorrow war was among the remedies'

(Agricola 29.1)

Not overly Stoic, then, but certainly no excess of lamentation: that is the preserve of women. In those terms, the episode of Nero's daughter, so far from proving his paternal credentials, has exposed the emperor once again as not enough of a man.

No men in the senate

But the problem doesn't lie with Nero alone. As usual, Tacitus directs his most bitter censure not at the emperor himself

but at the senators and other subjects who tolerate his imperial misrule. Even the conspiracy against him (15.48–73), with its flawed figurehead Piso, is a catalogue of incompetence and cowardice. Senators hesitate, vacillate, and fail, eventually incriminating each other, their friends – and Lucan even implicates his mother. Their failure triggers a wave of killings, spilling on into the next year and the next book. Tacitus pauses there for a moment to sigh in revulsion at this parade of 'slavish passivity' (*patientia servilis*, 16.16.1). Now, *patientia* can be a positive term for the noble endurance of a soldier or Stoic philosopher. But when it's 'slavish', there's no room for doubt: this is the passivity of submission, as senator after knight after senator lets himself be led to slaughter.

Just one individual comes out of the conspiracy well, as Tacitus tells it, and that individual is – revealingly – a woman, Epicharis. It is she who prompts the conspirators to action (15.51), she who endures horrific torture, then evades her interrogators by committing suicide (15.57). Tacitus pulls no punches in contrasting her heroism with the pathetic performance offered by the men around her.

This indictment of the senatorial class is characteristic of Tacitus. But its expression in gendered terms chimes all too well with the story he tells about Nero, expressing how corruption spreads from the emperor to the empire he rules. It also makes a fitting end for the *Annals* as a whole. Right from the outset, Tacitus is deeply concerned with the influence of women behind the scenes in Rome's new, autocratic government. Livia manipulates Augustus into adopting her son Tiberius. Claudius' wife Messalina makes a mockery of him, to the point of marrying a senator. Once Messalina is dead and Agrippina takes her place, things get even worse:

From that point on the state was overturned, and all Rome was subject to a woman.

(Annals 12.7.3)

If we're in any doubt about Tacitus' views about women in power (or how he would have got on with Angela Merkel), we just have to read what he has to say about one Germanic tribe:

they are different (from their neighbours) in one respect, that they are ruled by a woman. That is how far they fall not only below liberty but even below slavery.

(Germania 45.5)

Empire unmanned

Agrippina's domination of Claudius, and so of Rome, takes imperial history to a

new low: could things get any worse? Well, yes. And they have to: Tacitus' epic *Annals* are programmed to get bigger and better – which is to say, from an ethical viewpoint, worse – as they go on. With Agrippina, Rome had a mistress. Nero fixed that by having her murdered – and promptly abandoned himself to playing the lyre and other such perversities. With him Rome had a master again, but a master who was no man.

Roman history is often thought of as men's business. Certainly Tacitus is no feminist – and I trust you've realized that I don't share his views. But precisely because manliness and womanliness (and unmanliness) was such a powerful polarity in Roman society, gender plays a crucial role in his narrative of the principate. Good advocate as he is, Tacitus leaves it implicit most of the time. The po-faced progression from Pythagoras to the fire in A.D. 64 is one of those moments. In fact, it's perhaps the most pregnant juxtaposition of the whole work. Whether or not Nero literally started the fire is not the point: Tacitus is interested in a more abstract, but perhaps more fundamental type of explanation. In pinning Rome's greatest catastrophe on the moment when the emperor spectacularly unmans himself, Tacitus penetrates to the core – as he would have us see it – of the problem with Nero.

Christopher Whitton teaches Latin literature at the University of Cambridge. His commentary on book 2 of Pliny's Letters was published in 2013.